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ABSTRACT

The paper, originally given at a 1986 Ethnic and Multicultural Symposium, looks at ways to enhance the involvement of black parents of handicapped adolescents in their educational program. Cultural, social, and economic considerations unique to black families are considered. Improved communication, greater utilization of resources within the black community, outreach and partnership programs, and support for the development of advocacy programs are suggested as ways to enhance the involvement of black parents. Specific suggestions include the following: respect black parents; develop interpersonal relations; make a special attempt to involve black fathers; contact black fraternities and sororities; use local ministries; use peer parents and paraprofessionals; and make home visits. (DB)

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Enhancing the Involvement of Black Parents of Adolescents with Handicaps

LaDelle Olion

Research pertaining to the involvement of Black parents of adolescents with handicaps is conspicuously absent from the literature. Despite the large number of Black adolescents with handicaps whose needs are not being met in the schools, and the proven relationship between effective parent involvement and the teaching and learning process (Comer, 1986; Marion, 1981), few studies have addressed this important area.

Recently there has been speculation about why more research studies have not been conducted on the involvement of Black parents with their adolescent children; however, the reasons are not fully known. Banks (1980) has noted that in the past, research and thinking about Black Americans was almost nonexistent because of a long history of discrimination. He further contends that the problems of Blacks were ignored or minimized by professionals because for years they were seen as relatively powerless and of low status. The Task Force on Black Academics and Cultural Excellence (1984), has pointed out that there is a lack of research on Blacks and their families because African-Americans have been lumped together with all others, with no recognition of the unique problems they have encountered and continue to experience. McAdoo (1981) adds that research in specific areas, such as the Black father's role in the socialization of his children, rarely occurs in social science literature. Others have questioned the appropriateness or the need for research or discussion articles on Blacks or in this case the involvement of Black parents of adolescents with handicaps.

Are Black parents really different from any other parents who have an adolescent with a handicap? Is involving parents of a young Black child with a handicap any different from trying to involve parents of an older child with a handicap? These and many more questions remain unanswered and primarily unaddressed in the literature. This chapter discusses the unique features of parenting older Black students with handicaps and offers some proven strategies that professionals may use to improve the involvement of Black parents of adolescents with handicaps.

UNIQUENESS FEATURES

Parenting is defined as the process by which the family socializes its children into the gender, cultural, and economic roles that the parents and/or society deem appropriate. Being the parent of any child (young or old) may involve problems and a certain amount of stress; however, parenting is seen as a more demanding task for Black families than for majority families, given the lowered expectations for achievement, economic discrimination, inferior medical services, and lower quality of life faced by many Black families (McAdoo, 1978). Jacobs (1986) states that over 40% of Black families are now headed by single females and that among

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families headed by females, 54.6% were considered to be living below the poverty level. For Black families with two parents, the poverty rate was 17.4%. Jacobs concludes that 66.2% of all Black children living in a household headed by a female were living below the poverty level in 1984.

Pierce (1969), a Harvard psychiatrist, also agrees that many Black Americans are different, and he states that "Black Americans live in a unique but mundane extreme environment of subtle-to-overt racism" (Peters, 1981, p. 220). Peters (1981) notes that:

- These oppressive environmental forces influence how Black families live and rear their children.
- Research on parenting in Black families demonstrates that the behavior and lifestyles of many Black people are different from those of Whites.
- Child rearing priorities, attitudes, and patterns of behaviors have developed out of the exigencies of the unique economic, cultural, and racial circumstances in which Blacks have lived.
- Most Black parents socialize their children to become self- sufficient, competent adults as defined by the society in which they live.
- For some Black families in the United States, socialization occurs within a cultural heritage that is both Afro-American and Euro-American and espouses both democratic equality for all citizens and caste-like status for its Black citizens.

On the other hand, like other parents, many Black parents are not prepared to be the parents of a child with a handicap; just like other parents of children with handicaps, Black parents frequently operate under tremendous physical, financial, emotional, and marital stress (Peters, 1981). In other words, in some respects parenting Black children or adolescents with handicaps may be no different from parenting any other child or adolescent with a handicap. Nevertheless, some Black parents are unique in that they face additional problems as a result of their culturally diverse status.

It is important to note that not all Black parents are alike, and that Black parents come from a variety of cultural groups in Africa and America. Lifestyles, values, and experiences vary a great deal within the Black community; however, members of the Black community have generally had the common experience of economic isolation, prejudice, and legally reinforced racism (McAdoo, 1978). Black parents first face the challenge of having dark skin color in many cases. Even today race and color are factors which influence education and affect one's identity and behavior in this country (Erikson, 1968). Likewise, the color and race of parents plays an important role in the whole process of parent participation, a premise that is supported by Comer (1986). Comer states that many schools simply do not want parents present and are reluctant to become involved with them because of racial, income, and educational differences.

The second challenge that many Black parents face is being the parent of a handicapped child. Marion (1980) mentions the similarities of Black parents who have handicapped children; however, he points out the following differences in being a Black parent of a handicapped child. First, many parents of culturally diverse handicapped children express anger and dismay at the overinclusion of their children in classes for the mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed. Many feel desperate and confused and express their anger at an educational system that they feel has promoted these two categories (mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed) as the only appropriate depositories for their children (Marion, 1979). Second, many of the frustrations of parents of culturally diverse populations have revolved around the condition of schooling for adolescents. He states that parents are concerned that many culturally diverse adolescents have been mislabeled because of their culturally different mannerisms.

The third challenge that many Black parents face which makes them unique is being the parent of an adolescent who has a handicap. Adolescence has been defined as a period when there is a struggle between independence and dependence; it is marked by a break from

childhood, culminating in psychological maturity (Sabatino, 1980). Sabatino also defines adolescence as a period of (a) rapid physical growth, (b) newfound concerns for a place in an enlarged world, (c) establishment of sex role relationships, and (d) intense pressures from without to accept the adult world and declare an earned place in it. Jacks (1978) comments that adolescence does not miraculously bypass the student with a handicap. Add to these developmental dimensions the specific problems of teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, achievement motivation, high unemployment, suicide, juvenile delinquency, and an excessive dropout rate. Finally, combine these problems with the factors of race and handicapping conditions, and hopefully one can clearly see the complexities and uniqueness of problems surrounding Black families parenting adolescents with handicaps.

As a result of the uniqueness of the experiences of Black parents of adolescents with handicaps, many Black parents may require a different approach to get them involved and to meet their specific needs (Olion, Gillis-Olion, & Holmes, 1986).

STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING INVOLVEMENT

In discussing or recommending techniques and strategies to be used to involve Black parents with handicapped adolescents, the lack of valid research to support such recommendations is often mentioned as a major criticism. As a result, only recommendations that have been made by authors or organizations that are knowledgeable, sensitive, and experienced in working with Black parents and handicapped students are included here. The recommendations to professionals are as follows:

1. *Respect Black parents.* Although respect is a courtesy that should be given to all parents, some professionals forget this when they interact with Black parents. In fact, lack of respect is often mentioned by Black parents as one of the reasons why they have refused to be involved in the schools (Marion, 1981). It should be noted that the problem is not totally racial; some Black parents have accused Black professionals of the same lack of respect. Professionals should note that unless there is respect for Black parents, there is little hope for successfully involving them in their children's education.
2. *Listen to Black parents and establish rapport.* Marion (1981) points out that professionals should be able to listen to parents without building up value judgments by using the following techniques:
   - Relax physically and center attention on the parents.
   - Use eye contact to help focus upon the parents and to communicate to them that they are being heard.
   - Understand what the parents are saying.

   Marion contends this is important because Black parents are often not afforded the courtesy of being heard. After listening to Black parents, it will be easier to establish rapport. If parents are not talkative, ask them what their views are about school. What do they feel you should be doing with their adolescent with special needs? Ask the parents about their practices in rearing their adolescent. What are their problem areas? Give them opportunities to express anxieties. These are some questions that may open up the discussion; however, remember the importance of listening to the parents. Marion (1981) points out that Black parents stop listening and talking when they are not heard.
3. *Develop interpersonal relations.* Parents should feel comfortable talking with professionals. However, the social struggles that have taken place over the last two decades have increased distrust between school personnel and parents. When parents sense neglect or exclusion, or when their children are having difficulty in school, they often become defensive, and the parent/school relationship is further complicated. Feelings of support, understanding, and caring must be sincerely conveyed by professionals to Black parents.

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4. *Give Black parents straight answers.* If professionals are going to persuade Black parents to become involved, we must give them facts and straight answers to specific questions about their adolescent's needs and how the school intends to meet them. Unfortunately such answers seem to be difficult to get, sometimes for good reasons, but more often because nonspecific communication has become a parent/management tactic. General reassurances are not reassuring. Trust is not established by saying "Trust us" (Morton & Hull, 1976). As professionals we must be open and honest if we want to improve the involvement of Black parents.
5. *Actively involve Black parents.* Some schools give lip service to the importance of parent involvement, but do not give parents the opportunity to play a meaningful role. In some schools, Black parents are called only when there is a problem with their adolescent child. Some Black parents, who recall similar difficulties while they were in school themselves, are not eager to be involved. In attempting to actively involve Black parents we must discuss parent roles. Roles and responsibilities should be openly discussed in order to avoid misunderstanding (Minority Leadership Consortium of the Handicapped Children's Early Education Program, 1981). Black parents should be made to feel that they are *an active part of* the planning team rather than *the object of* the team's planning. Parent participation must be well-thought-out and well-structured. When this is not done, parent's concerns about teaching methods, the goals of the school, and even the competence of the staff can lead to conflict (Comer, 1986).
6. *Make a special attempt to involve Black fathers.* When Black parent involvement is examined, one finds that the mother is the parent most often involved. As a result, Young (1983) points out, some professionals view the father as unimportant. He asserts that the role of parenting is changing and that many Black fathers want to be involved. Working with Black fathers is an excellent suggestion, and perhaps if we focused on involving Black fathers of adolescents with handicaps, we would have identified another overlooked resource that could be used to improve parent participation. Young (1983) also states that meeting with fathers on Saturdays and training them as tutors of their handicapped children have been types of programs that have been successfully used with Black fathers in the Atlanta area.
7. *Contact Black fraternities and sororities.* Black fraternities and sororities represent substantial human and financial resources that could be used to improve parent participation, and to improve the skills of Black adolescents with handicaps. Black fraternities and sororities are numerous and can be found on campuses of historically Black and major institutions across the country (see Figure 1). An example of the type of project a fraternity or sorority might undertake is demonstrated by Omega Psi Phi, a predominantly Black fraternity. In one of the local chapters in Fayetteville, North Carolina, a Saturday enrichment program has been started that focuses primarily on adolescents with learning problems. The project has been in existence for approximately 5 years, and teachers and parents refer adolescents who need assistance to the program. The program serves regular students primarily; however, some of the fraternity members have expertise in special education and the program is now serving some adolescents with handicaps. The program has been so successful that other local fraternity and sorority chapters have now become involved, and the services have been expanded.

   Black sororities and fraternities may also be willing to pay for limited child care services, allowing Black parents to participate in school programs. In addition, these organizations may be tapped to aid in understanding the Black family value system, or members may be used as tutors or as trainers of handicapped adolescents. Fraternity and sorority members could also be used to help alleviate the unnecessary referrals of some adolescents for special education services. The important point is that members of these organizations are knowledgeable and well-trained professionals, who are looking for opportunities to serve their communities. Involving Black fraternities and sororities with Black parents is a potential area of community service that should be investigated at each local level (Olion, 1982).

FIGURE 1

List of Black Fraternities and Sororities

Black Fraternities	*Black Sororities*
1. Omega Psi Phi	1. Delta Sigma Theta
2. Kappa Alpha Psi	2. Alpha Kappa Alpha
3. Alpha Phi Alpha	3. Sigma Gamma Rho
4. Phi Beta Sigma	4. Zeta Phi Beta

8. *Use local ministers.* Transportation has been listed as a major deterrent to the involvement of Black parents of handicapped children (Patton & Braithwaite, 1984). Local ministers should be contacted, as many churches have vans and buses that may be available to help transport parents to meetings. Churches may also be used for parent meetings.

9. *Develop a partnership.* The current upsurge of interest in school reform is bringing renewed interest in a variety of plans to increase parent participation in education. One such proposal is the partnership concept. The idea is that the education of students should be viewed as a partnership between the school and the home; that students and parents are co-producers of education, not simply passive recipients of educational services. Advocates of partnerships see them as a way to organize resources inside and outside the school system (Davies, 1985). The partnership concept places the responsibility for learning on students, parents, and the broader community as well as on teachers (Seely, 1981). Activities that may be included in a partnership program include home tutoring, homework helper and homework hot line projects, home visitor programs, parent education, and parent volunteer programs.

   An example of a partnership program in action is found in the Cumberland County Schools, in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The program was proposed in 1986 and implemented in 1987. It is a university-public school program that includes Black parents of handicapped adolescents. Fayetteville State University, a local university, adopted E. E. Smith, a senior high school. As a result, E. E. Smith Senior High School currently sends a number of its students to Fayetteville State University to receive reading instruction and other training. Parents of "adopted" students have also been included, and plans are now being made to conduct parenting workshops for parents who have various needs. It should be noted that the partnership program in Cumberland County is not designed exclusively for Black adolescents or Black parents. However, the project currently serves a large number of Black parents and their adolescent children. The partnership concept is a viable strategy that should be tried in an effort to improve the participation of Black parents.

10. *Develop Black parent advocacy programs.* Professionals must take a stronger and more programmatic interest in alleviating the problems that affect Black students and their parents. Professionals and Black parents must raise issues of nutrition, education, and employment needs if they are to be met for Black students (Edelman, 1981). Professionals must become well informed about the needs of Black adolescents with handicaps, must be persistent, and must focus energy on real issues, not symbolic ones. Goals must be set, thinking must take place about how to achieve goals, and means must be chosen to reach these goals. The premise in developing Black parent advocacy programs is that some Black parents may feel powerless, and as a result they may need the support of strong, well trained advocates. For example, an advocate might accompany parents to meetings to

discuss assessment results and eligibility for special education. Advocates could also assist adolescents and their parents with other school related problems.

11. *Use peer parents and paraprofessionals.* The job of peer parents or paraprofessionals would be to relate strategies that they have used successfully with their handicapped teenagers to other Black parents (Marion, 1980). Boone and Smith (1981) suggest that we identify community persons who can serve as informal intermediaries between the home and school. Retired teachers, church members, ministers, and extended family members could be trained to relay information to parents in an informal setting, or they could be used to assist in identifying adolescents with special needs.
12. *Make home visits.* Home visits should be made for the purpose of trying to relate to men and women who are significant to the adolescent. Professionals should try to find out about the parents' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the school environment (Boone & Smith, 1981). Professionals should also try to get an idea of the parents' expectations as they relate to goals for their handicapped adolescent. These visits should not be evaluative in nature.
13. *Use recorded telephone messages.* Chapman and Howard (1982) suggest that recorded telephone messages be used to improve communication between parents and teachers. They state that the recorded message is a nonthreatening way to get parents actively involved in the student's academic assignments and in the activities of the school. Although Chapman's and Howard's suggestions were not designed specifically for Black parents of handicapped adolescents, the nonthreatening facet of the recorded messages makes their suggestion a very promising method to initiate participation of Black parents.
14. *Use role-playing and media training techniques.* Role playing is an important technique that has been successfully used to train parents. Role playing keeps the participants involved and motivated, and parents can be taught skills through role-playing interactions that may include individual education plan development or how to design and implement an intervention strategy (Olion, 1982). Media such as videotapes, slide presentations, and films can also assist in motivating Black parents and aid in maintaining interest. The biggest problem, however, is to locate material on handicapped adolescents that is relevant to Black parents.
15. *Involve Black parents in nontraditional ways.* For example, a parents day may be held when parents are invited to share a cultural activity with a class or parents might be asked to bring their favorite dishes to a pot luck dinner. This should be a relatively inexpensive way to get better acquainted with Black parents (Minority Leadership Consortium of the Handicapped Children's Early Education Program, 1981).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Black parents of adolescents with handicaps come from a variety of cultural and economic groups; therefore, in some cases strategies to involve Black parents in education would be no different from strategies used to involve any other parents with adolescents who are handicapped. On the other hand, parenting is seen as a more onerous task for Black families than for majority families, given their often lowered expectations for achievement, economic discrimination, inferior medical services, and a lower quality of life (McAdoo, 1978). Jacobs (1986) has pointed out that many Black families are headed by Black females and that 66.2% of all Black children living in a household headed by a female live below the poverty level. Additionally, it has been pointed out that Black parents face problems because of their skin color. Erickson (1968) has asserted that educators must learn that one's race and color are factors that influence education, and that educators must learn that one's race and color affects one's identity and behavior in this country. Comer (1986) has also concluded that many schools simply do not want parents present and are reluctant to become involved because of racial, income, and educational differences. Additional problems associated with being an adolescent

and having a handicap have also been identified as problems that Black parents face in parenting. As a result of these unique differences, it was concluded that different approaches may be required to enhance parent involvement.

It has been noted that Black parents can make important contributions to the educational process, if they are actively involved and given the proper respect and opportunity. The effectiveness of Black parents with adolescents who are handicapped depends to a great degree on skillful professional guidance. Many more Black parents of adolescents with handicaps will get acquainted with schools and become better volunteers if they feel that they are welcome, know that their teenagers are treated fairly, are understood and listened to, and receive appropriate information on how to access the system when they are having problems.

The strategies suggested are not intended to be a panacea, nor will they be effective with all Black parents. In fact, none of the strategies recommended will have any significant impact on enhancing the involvement of Black parents with handicapped adolescents, unless professionals stop looking at working with Black parents as a step down or as a waste of valuable time. Responding to the specific needs of Black parents requires that professionals know and understand the culture from which parents come. Professionals must be aware of the unique qualities, values, and variations in lifestyle and structure found among Black families. We must learn to look at Black parents within the context of the parent's own cultural setting before any conjecture is made about their behavior. As professionals we must decide that we sincerely want to involve Black parents of handicapped adolescents, despite the many challenges that may be encountered in this endeavor.

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